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ABSTRACT

Teachers cannot afford to ignore the research findings on right and left brain functions. Basically, three things have been discovered: (1) each hemisphere of the brain processes information differently; (2) in some people, the hemispheres work well together, in others they are in a constant state of disagreement; and (3) each hemisphere is equally important. Four distinct learning styles have been identified; their rough proportion in any school population is as follows: innovative learners (35%), analytic learners (22%), common sense learners (18%), and dynamic learners (25%). Our whole educational system is geared to the analytic learners, only 22 percent of the population. To encourage whole-brain learning necessitates constructing programs which incorporate all learning styles. Students need to learn from concrete experiences as well as abstract ones and to learn through both active experimentation and reflective observation. If whole-brain curricula and learning centers are developed, and instruction is geared to identified learning styles, then students will be more successful and feel far better about themselves. (DC)

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HALF A MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO WASTE

by James E. Conner

(Article appearing in For Adults Only; vol. 15, no. 1, p. 4, Fall 1982)

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Half A Mind Is A Terrible Thing To Waste

Dr. Bernice McCarthy says:

> The research findings on right and left brain functions are fascinating. No teacher or trainer can afford to ignore them.

Indeed, the findings are fascinating, and we ignore them at our peril.

The fact is, with the discoveries of Nobel Laureate, Dr. Roger Sperry and others about how the brain works, the world can never again be the same. The genie has been let out of the bottle and even if we wanted to, we couldn't stuff him back in.

Basically, three things were discovered in the brain research:

1. Each hemisphere of the brain processes information differently.
2. There would seem to be two "people" in our brains: one rational and judgmental, the other creative, playful, intuitive. In some people, the two "people" work well together; in others, they are in a constant state of disagreement.
3. The right hemisphere is not a "spare tire" for the left as originally thought; each hemisphere, while different, is equally important.*

Heady stuff, to be sure. But what does all this have to do with Adult Basic Education?

Researchers have discovered that learners show not only a preference for one hemispheric mode over another, for distinctive learning styles, for their own learning comfort zones, but that the "place" where students learn best can be pinpointed with some precision. By and large, four distinct learning styles have been identified:

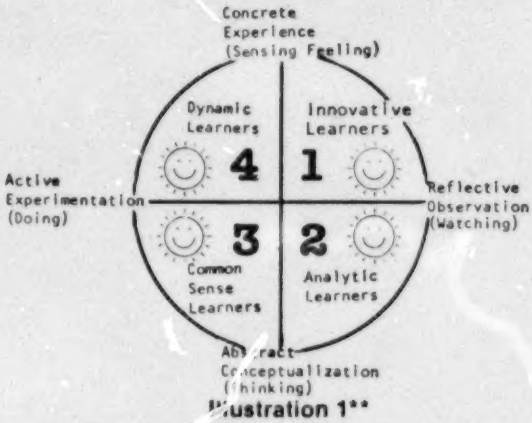

Illustration 1**

In any school population, the distribution of learning styles is roughly as shown below:

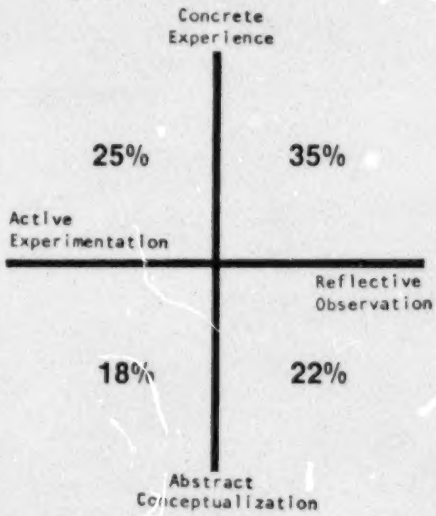

Illustration 2

Here is what this has been building up to: Our whole educational system is based on the Number 2 learning style, on a reverence for the rational and analytical way of thinking, and on a low opinion of the intuitive, creative way, as well as on neglect of direct, concrete experiences. A visit to any library or learning center will confirm this statement. There can be little doubt that we tend to favor students who are good at abstract thinking. In other words, our school and college programs are geared to approximately 22 percent of the population! This means that 78 percent are not only shortchanged grievously, but that the favored 22 percent are being denied a whole range of cognitive and affective experiences. Incidentally, a predominant number of ABE students are to be found in first quadrant, the concrete experience/reflective-observation quadrant.

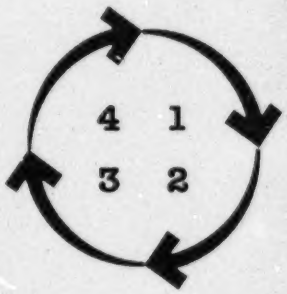

Illustration 3

To become whole-brain learners, however, necessitates constructing programs to accommodate all learning styles, providing opportunities to learn from concrete experiences as well as abstractly, to learn through active experimentation and reflective observation. All this means also that we must be willing to look critically at our community college and technical institute learning centers to assure ourselves that they are providing a balanced diet, based on the four learning styles. What is clearly needed is the development and utilization of "whole-brain" curricula and "whole-brain" learning centers to help all students progress from their individual "comfort zones" toward utilizing the full repetoire of learning modes, toward becoming "whole-brain" learners. I would guess that if we can enter this new frontier of the mind — if we can gear our instruction to identified learning styles, then students will be more successful and feel far better about themselves. Further, by applying research about how the brain functions to our instruction, we should witness a dramatic decline in the number of students who drop out. These are hypotheses worth testing. After all, half a mind is a terribe thing to waste!

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*These three points are modified versions of those made by McCarthy in The 4 Mat System, pp. 74-75. (EXCEL, Inc., 600 Enterprise Drive, Suite 101, Oakbrook, ILL. 60521).

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